Sciatica

By Mayo Clinic staff

Overview

The longest nerve in your body, the sciatic nerve runs from your pelvis through your hip area and buttocks and down each leg. It divides into the tibial and peroneal nerves at the level of your knees. The sciatic nerve controls many of the muscles in your lower legs and provides feeling to your thighs, legs and feet.

The term *sciatica* refers to pain that radiates along the path of this nerve — from your back into your buttock and leg. The discomfort can range from mild to incapacitating, and may be accompanied by tingling, numbness or muscle weakness. Rather than a disorder in and of itself sciatica is a symptom of another problem, such as a herniated disk, that puts pressure on the nerve.

Sciatic pain usually goes away on its own in six weeks or so. In the meantime, hot and cold packs, over-the-counter pain relievers, and exercise or physical therapy can help ease discomfort and speed recovery. Surgery to relieve pressure on the nerve may be an option when symptoms don't respond to conservative treatment and pain is chronic or disabling.

Signs and symptoms

Pain that radiates from your lower (lumbar) spine to your buttock and down the back of your leg is the hallmark of sciatica. You may feel the discomfort almost anywhere along the nerve pathway, but it's especially likely to follow one of these routes:

- From your lower back to your knee
- From the midbuttock to the outside of your calf, the top of your foot and into the space between your last two toes
- From the inside of your calf to your inner ankle and sole

The pain can vary widely, from a mild ache to a sharp, burning sensation or excruciating discomfort. Sometimes it may feel like a jolt or electric shock. Sciatic pain often starts gradually and intensifies over time. It's likely to be worse when you sit, cough or sneeze. Usually only one lower extremity is affected.

In addition to pain, you may also experience:

- **Numbness or muscle weakness along the nerve pathway in your leg or foot.** In some cases, you may have pain in one part of your leg and numbness in another.
- **Tingling or a pins-and-needles feeling.** This occurs most commonly in your toes or part of your foot.
- **A loss of bladder or bowel control.** This is a sign of cauda equina syndrome, a rare but serious condition that requires emergency care. If you experience either of these symptoms, seek medical help immediately.

Common terms on over-the-counter pain relievers: What do they mean?

By Mayo Clinic staff

Over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers are packaged in bottles and boxes that are covered with words. The information on these products can help you decide which one is best for you — if you understand the lingo. Here are the definitions of some common terms you'll find in the pain reliever aisles at your local drugstore.

Terms in the Drug Facts label

The Food and Drug Administration requires all OTC products to contain certain information in a standardized Drug Facts label. This simple, uniform label is intended to help you compare and choose medications wisely. These terms appear in the Drug Facts label in this order:

Active ingredient. This is the medication that works to relieve your symptoms. There may be more than one active ingredient in a product. And the same active ingredient may be present in many different brands of medicine. For

example, aspirin — sometimes abbreviated ASA — and acetaminophen are active ingredients in many common pain relievers.

Before buying a pain reliever, be sure to look at its label to determine the active ingredients. Also note the amount of active ingredient in each dose — usually expressed in milligrams (mg). Typically, you can choose among several products that have the same active ingredient and dose, opting for the best price or for a preferred method of delivery — capsule instead of tablet, for example. Brand-name pain relievers, such as Tylenol, aren't any better than their generic equivalents, such as your local drugstore brand acetaminophen.

Inactive ingredients. Preservatives, binding agents and food colorings fall into this category, which includes all chemicals in a medicine that aren't meant to treat your symptoms. Pay close attention to this information if you have food allergies or other allergies.

Uses. Also called indications, this section of the label lists the signs and symptoms the medicine is approved to treat.

Warnings. This safety information tells you what other medicines, foods or situations — such as driving — to avoid while taking the medicine.

What's the difference between a tablet, a caplet and a geltab? Read on.

Terms that describe the form of medication

Tablet. This solid pill is created by packing the active ingredient together with a binding agent. Tablets are usually the cheapest form of medication, but they may be difficult for some people to swallow.

Capsule. This is the term for a hollow gelatin container that holds a powdered medication. Many people have an easier time swallowing capsules than they do swallowing ordinary tablets.

Caplet. Caplets are solid tablets in the shape of a capsule with a smooth coating. Caplets, like capsules, may go down more easily than ordinary tablets.

Gelcap. This is a caplet with a gelatin coating to aid in ease of swallowing.

Geltab. This is a tablet with a gelatin coating to aid in ease of swallowing.

Liquigel. This capsule contains medicine that has been dissolved into liquid form.

Suspension. A liquid suspension contains drug particles that can't be dissolved. It must be shaken thoroughly before use to redisperse the drug particles.

Other terms on the package or bottle

The following terms describe special features that are present in some pain medications. Adding these terms to your vocabulary can help you select the right medication for relief.

Buffered. A buffered pain reliever contains an antacid to reduce acidity in the stomach. There is some debate about whether buffered products actually protect your stomach, but they may decrease upset stomach.

Combination formula. Products with this term contain two or more active ingredients. Caffeine is sometimes used as an active ingredient in addition to other pain relievers. Studies show that the addition of caffeine to aspirin or acetaminophen (Excedrin, others) improves pain relief.

Enteric-coated. This special coating allows pills to pass undigested thorough your stomach and be dissolved in your small intestine, which helps reduce stomach irritation. Because the coating delays absorption, it's not the best choice for quick relief, such as for a headache.

Extra-strength. Dose for dose, these preparations contain more active ingredient than regular-strength products contain. For example, an extra-strength Tylenol has 500 milligrams of acetaminophen, compared to 325 milligrams in the regular-strength version. Extra-strength formulas are more convenient when you need more than one regular-strength dose to improve your symptoms. Use added caution when you're taking extra-strength preparations. Be sure to keep track of the number of doses you take so you don't exceed the recommended maximum dose.

Migraine formula. Products with this label are approved for treating migraine headaches — severe headaches that are often accompanied by other signs and symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting and light sensitivity.

PM or night formula. These medications are meant to be used in the evening, because they may make you drowsy. Oral medications with this description include a sedating drug, such as an antihistamine.

Scored. These tablets have a groove in them, which allows you to more easily break them in half. Scored tablets may be useful if you need to take less than the amount in one dose, which may help limit side effects.

Timed-release. Also called extended-release or sustained-release, these products dissolve slowly. They prolong the effect of the medication by maintaining a sustained level of the active ingredient in your blood. Use them if you need lasting, not just immediate, relief. But don't crush or chew these products.

Read all about it

The information on today's over-the-counter medications is easier to understand than ever. Technical terms like "contraindications" and "precautions" have been eliminated. So has haphazardly placed safety information and teeny tiny type.

So there's no excuse for not reading the print before you make a purchase. Also, be sure to read the label — including the expiration date — when you dig something out of your medicine cabinet